

## PART III

## ON THE LINE

The battalion found itself in a combat situation wholly unlike the more conventional patterns of past wars. The usual breakdown of embattled areas into front lines and rear areas did not apply in the Vietnam situation. The Viet Cong could (and did) strike both rear elements and forward units with equal impunity. Sustained contact with the enemy seldom occurred for the guerillas regularly vanished into their jungle hideouts and VC dominated villages after each skirmish. The American's major problem was one of target acquisition. To give order to the search for the enemy, the TAOR (Tactical Area of Responsibility) concept was evolved. This theory gave certain units responsibility for finding and destroying enemy units within a certain specific area (generally in the geographic vicinity of base camps). The entire country was thus placed under specific control. ARVN organizations as well as free world forces were given TAORs. Supporting units within the area assisted the primary organization in dispensing its responsibility. When unusual situations in a particular area arose, assistance was easily obtained from forces in other TAORs.

The 6th Battalion, 27th Artillery became very familiar with this mode of operation. Bravo Battery, Charlie Battery and Battalion Headquarters found themselves in the 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division TAOR. Alpha Battery, at Bien Hoa, was in the area of operation of the 173d Airborne Brigade. Yet the battalion's fires were not limited to a single TAOR. A system of coordination of fire was worked out by Battalion Headquarters at Phuoc Vinh. In this system Battery "A", 6th Battalion, 27th Artillery, at Bien Hoa, Battery "A", 2d Battalion, 32d Artillery at Bien Hoa and Battery "B", 2d Battalion, 32d Artillery at Lai Khe furnished interlocking and overlapping fires for each other. This enabled all three batteries to better support the elements in their area of responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

Artillery support was supplied to Popular Forces Hamlets, ARVN units and Special Forces camps.<sup>2</sup> Forward observers were on occasion sent to all these type units, particularly to the Special Forces "A" teams. While engaged in defending the latter's base camps, these forward observers in some instances directed fire to within 600 meters of their own positions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Unit Historical Report, 1966, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>The Popular Forces were an organization of local defenders.

<sup>3</sup>Ltr, HQ, 6th Bn, 27th Arty, Subj: Meritorious Unit Commendation, dtd 2 Jan 67, p. 2.

Several airmobile operations conducted by the Special Forces were supported by the Battalion. One of these netted a total of 20 VC killed, with a probable 40 more. All of these casualties were directly attributable to artillery.<sup>4</sup> Because of this support the VC operations in these areas were very effectively hindered. The long range capabilities of the 175mm gun were well utilized as these camps were a considerable distance from the Battalion's firing positions.<sup>5</sup>

Battery "A" formed plans for long range interdiction fire in War Zone "D" in addition to furnishing artillery fires on call. Cable communications were established between the battery and the Dong Nai sensitive area so that the battery could receive intelligence information and furnish fire quickly.<sup>6</sup>

The Battalion discovered that a circular line of contact was the usual method of operation in Vietnam. It was found that the batteries could operate effectively throughout their entire 6400 mil range (though the fire direction centers had to modify their standard operating procedure a bit). One chart was used for both 8" gun and 175mm gun plots. Two different grid scales were used on the same chart; 8" grid squares were in red, 175mm grid squares were in black. Deflection corrections were recorded on the graphical firing tables (GFT). Four sets of GFT's, each labelled for a different direction of fire, were maintained. It was not unusual for each piece in a firing battery to be pointed in a different direction. In the batteries, two aiming circles were set up. Although this system was complex and required close supervision, it was very effective.<sup>7</sup>

Intelligence information was received primarily from 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division Overlays, Intelligence Summaries and Special Forces reports. Personal contacts were established with the 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division S-2, Special Forces, Criminal Investigation Division and the Military Assistance Command adviser in Phuoc Vinh. A liaison was effected with the US Air Force Forward Air Controllers.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately some reports received by the Battalion were old and outdated, some by as much as five days. This severely impeded their usefulness. The problem was solved by the 1st Brigade's more frequent use of long range patrols.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Ltr, HQ, 6th Bn, 27th Arty, AVGE-Y, Subj: Operational Report for Quarterly Period Ending 31 July 1966, Reports Control Symbol CSFOB-65 (U), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup>Unit Historical Report, 1966, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup>Ltr, HQ, 6th Bn, 27th Arty, AVGE-Y, Subj: Operational Report on Lessons Learned (RCS CSGPO-28)(R1)(U), dtd 9 May 66 p. 9.

<sup>8</sup>Unit Historical Report, 1966, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup>Quarterly Report, 31 Jul 66, p. 7.

A prime source of intelligence information was the Battalion's aviation program. Using two O-1 "Birddogs" (small observation planes) and an OH-13 helicopter, the area around Phuoc Vinh was thoroughly scanned daily for signs of VC activity. This proved to be a frustrating as well as hazardous undertaking. Because of the dense jungle (large areas were covered with double and triple tree canopies), the aircraft at times had to be flown at an altitude of 50' above treetop level in order for the observer to see through the dense foliage. Daylight visual reconnaissance seldom yielded positive identifications, for the VC preferred to move under cover of darkness.<sup>10</sup> Night flights were then scheduled to increase the chances of observing "live" targets. In spite of the obvious difficulties inherent in nighttime operation, this proved to be the case. By the second quarter of 1966, over 14% of all flights were at night. Landings and takeoffs under cover of darkness were hazardous. Night lights on the planes could not be used because of the tactical situation (the threat of sniper fire near the airstrip was great). Battery operated runway lights could not be used without exposing ground personnel to sniper fire. Departures were usually instrument take-offs. Landings were accomplished either by moonlight or by use of flare illumination fired by mortars on order of the pilot. The results of these visual reconnaissance missions were sent to the 23d Artillery Group and the 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division in intelligence summaries, and posted on the Battalion activity overlay.<sup>11</sup>

Experience soon proved that the O-1 aircraft was far superior to the OH-13 for observation and adjustment of artillery fire. This was due to its higher inherent stability, lessened crew fatigue, ability to remain aloft and the fact that it could more easily fly at night and in poor weather. The helicopter proved invaluable to the Battalion Commander for reconnaissance and instantly available transportation to subordinate units.<sup>12</sup>

Night flights took on added significance with the addition of a Starlight Scope to the visual reconnaissance program. This light intensification device enabled the aerial observers to detect VC personnel and vehicular movements more easily at night.<sup>13</sup>

Immediately upon arrival in Phuoc Vinh the Battalion's communications section found that one of their first priorities was the construction of a battalion communications center. A structure had to be designed that would afford protection against attack for the switchboard and AM radio sets. The problem was solved through the use of "GI" ingenuity. Empty 175mm and

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup>Operational Report, 31 May 66, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, p. 8.

8" powder cans were filled with dirt and welded together end to end in groups of three and six. These were set vertically to form the walls. Beams were then laid across the tops to form a roof. Four layers with a plastic sheet (for waterproofing) sandwiched between the second and third layers were laid on the roof to provide protection. One layer of sandbags was placed around the walls for additional protection. The result was a bunker that could withstand any attack the enemy in the area were capable of launching. The radio bunker, located adjacent to the switchboard bunker, was of similar construction. Space inside the bunker was reserved for two conax transporters in which the AN/GRC 46 radios were placed. Holes were drilled in the transporters for cable hookup. Space was also reserved for parking of a M37B1 three-quarter ton truck to be used as an emergency power source. Construction of the walls and roof of the bunker itself was the same as that used for the switchboard bunker.<sup>14</sup>

Wire lines were laid out in both the Phuoc Vinh and Bien Hoa areas as soon as the batteries assumed their positions. Wires were laid so as to use a minimum of routes. There was a scarcity of trees in both areas and poles were not obtainable. Substitute poles, made by welding together two eight foot engineer stakes, were used to put all wires overhead. The placing of wire lines along common routes enabled the wires to be "cabled", providing a stronger line run, reducing the maintenance required, and presenting a neater appearance. A total of 42 miles of wire were laid in the construction of the Battalion wire lines.<sup>15</sup>

The firing batteries discovered immediately upon arrival that their firing pads were inadequate. A variety of materials were used to solve the problem. Each was shown to have certain disadvantages. Crushed rock damaged the road wheels and caused tracks to be thrown, concrete slabs did not provide enough cushioning. Laterite proved adequate during the dry season, but it was observed that these pads would turn into a quagmire with the onset of the monsoon season.<sup>16</sup>

To better serve both segments of the Battalion, the Battalion's supply section was divided into two parts. The S-4 Officer, Assistant Battalion Supply Sergeant, Supply Clerk, two Assistant Supply Clerks, and one heavy truck driver operated the supply section at Service Battery (or South Camp, as the Bien Hoa areas of "A" and Service Batteries were called). The Battalion Supply Technician, Supply Sergeant and a heavy truck driver operated the Phuoc Vinh (or North Camp) supply section. A 1200 gallon diesel fuel tank was installed in Phuoc Vinh for the Battalion, as well as a 600 gallon

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<sup>14</sup>Ltr, HQ, 6th Bn, 27th Arty, AVAC-Y, Subj: Unit Historical Report, dtd 5 Jan 66, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup>Operational Report, May 66, p. 4.

pod for gasoline. Service Battery installed a 1200 gallon tank for gasoline, which it filled from a filling station to which they had access. Trucks necessary for transporting this fuel were also brought to both locations.<sup>17</sup>

Logistical support for the Battalion was initially from the 1st Logistical Command and from stock control and issuing services in Saigon. After November 14, 1965 support was provided by the 1st Infantry Division Support Command for all items except Class V supplies. Batteries "A" and Service at Bien Hoa were serviced by the 2d Forward Support Detachment.<sup>18</sup>

Because of its isolation, supplies could be brought to Phuoc Vinh only by armed convoys or airplane. The initial convoy (November 19-22, 1965) brought organizational supplies, equipment, Class V and enough other supplies to keep the Battalion's Phuoc Vinh elements supplied for 40 days. A second convoy (December 26-30, 1965) brought in similar supplies for a 45 day interval.<sup>19</sup> Convoys were then scheduled at monthly or bi-monthly intervals thereafter. Batteries "A" and Service were located close to sources of supply, enabling them to resupply themselves almost at will.

Ammunition resupply was the responsibility of the Battalion ammunition section, which had eighteen five-ton trucks for this purpose. The ammunition supply point was at Long Binh, approximately 21 kilometers from Service Battery. Ammunition was brought to the firing batteries in Phuoc Vinh mainly by convoy, usually at the same time that other supplies were trucked to Phuoc Vinh. Additional rounds were frequently flown in, especially when stockpiles ran low.<sup>20</sup>

Overloading of trucks caused some problems on these resupply convoys. As the Army permitted a 100% overload on all trucks, the Battalion's vehicles often carried loads far in excess of the norm. It was discovered, however, that a 100% overload should be applied only on hard, smooth surfaced roads. Operation of overloaded trucks on secondary roads caused damage to the frame, springs and steering linkage. Ammunition trucks caused the most concern, for most types of ammunition overloaded a vehicle far before the volumetric capacity of its cargo area was reached.<sup>21</sup>

Some supply problems were caused by inefficient packing before the Battalion's departure from Ft Bliss. Many unseparated, unrelated items were packed together in boxes. Others were not packed in a neat and

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<sup>17</sup>Unit Historical Report, 5 Jan 66, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup>Operation Report, July 1966, p. 7.

orderly manner. Some items were exchanged for newer equipment at the last moment, causing packing and unpacking problems. Not all conex inserts were placed in trucks, which caused considerable damage to the cargo carried in them.<sup>22</sup>

The Battalion discovered upon arrival that many unnecessary items were lacking and that procuring these items was difficult. The meteorological section arrived in Vietnam with a sixty day supply of expendable items such as ballons and radiosondes. Though numerous requisitions for resupply were submitted, they were not filled until months later. The meteorological section also had extreme difficulty in getting repair parts for its equipment. Their radio antennas and other pieces of equipment were rare items in Vietnam and were not similar to other items in greater supply. Thus these weather men experienced long delays in repair of their equipment. Radioteletype parts were also in extremely short supply. Malfunctions in these particular pieces of equipment severely hampered communication within the Battalion, for these frequently were the only means of communication with the outlying firing batteries. Building materials were in short supply, as were sandbags. Gun carriages (M107 and M110) were often non-operational due to lack of repair parts. Hydraulic line leaks, broken spade braces and broken elevation and traverse gears were the major causes of breakdowns.<sup>23</sup>

The 6/27th was not alone in experiencing supply difficulties. The rapid influx of many units into Vietnam undeniably placed some strain upon the supply system. Yet it is to the credit of the logisticians involved that this Battalion at least was never significantly hampered by the lack of supplies.

Ordnance support was at first provided by the 85th Ordnance Company. On November 19, 1965 this support was taken over by the 701st Maintenance Battalion. Company "B" of the 701st supported Service and "A" Batteries at Bien Hoa, while Company "D" supported the other batteries at Phuoc Vinh. Both companies provided direct support for all equipment; i.e. automotive, armament, signal, chemical, engineer and quartermaster.<sup>24</sup>

Vehicle maintenance was performed at both the battalion and battery levels. The Battalion maintenance section at Phuoc Vinh took care of problems the individual battery maintenance sections could not resolve. Teams were sent to Bien Hoa to solve maintenance problems in "A" and Service Batteries. Periodic inspections of all equipment, as well as quarterly and semi-annual maintenance services were performed by all maintenance sections.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Unit Historical Report, Jan 66, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup>Operational Report, May 1966, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup>Unit Historical Report, Jan 66, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, p. 11.

Procurement of replacement personnel was never a problem, in fact eleven men were received while the Battalion was still in the staging area. It was found that frequent trips had to be made to the 90th Replacement Battalion to determine if the personnel assigned to the Battalion had arrived in-country. If this check was not done these personnel were liable to be assigned to another organization. This information could not be determined by telephone as this type of communication was seldom reliable. In spite of these problems the system worked so well that acute personnel turbulence never resulted in a lack of suitable replacement personnel.<sup>26</sup>

The flow of administrative correspondence was greatly hindered by the separation of the personnel section from the Battalion headquarters element. As this correspondence had to be flown out of Phuoc Vinh the number of distribution runs was limited by the number of available flights. Use of the Battalion's TO&E aircraft to move correspondence insured its delivery, but such flights were few as combat requirements for these aircraft came first. Field telephones were used to the maximum, but this method was inefficient and time consuming. Connections were weak and often lost in the middle of a conversation. The radioteletype was used, but combat use of this instrument took priority, limiting its administrative use.<sup>27</sup>

Distribution of publications was very slow. Directives and regulations from higher headquarters were often sent but never received. Compliance with these regulations was thus made difficult.

Efficiency reports were prepared by the S1 (Adjutant) instead of by the Personnel Officer who, due to his separation from Battalion Headquarters, could not meet suspense dates. Deadlines were not always met because there was only one clerk, a converted wireman. He was not accustomed to such meticulous work. Paperwork increased in the combat zone, instead of decreased as was originally assumed.<sup>28</sup>

Casualty reporting was done on an abbreviated form due to the separation of the personnel section from the Battalion Headquarters. Basic information, immediately available at the batteries, was placed on this form. The balance of the information was supplied from the 201 file by the personnel section. This procedure resulted in timely, accurate casualty reporting.<sup>29</sup>

APO 96307 was assigned to the Battalion prior to its departure from the United States. Due to the wide dispersion of the various Battalion elements the Battalion Mail Clerk was stationed at Tan Son Nhut Airbase.

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup>Operational Report, May 66, p. 5.

He was thus able to pick up the mail directly from the Base Post Office, one of the large central mail breakdown points. He then broke the mail down by batteries and placed the mail for Headquarters, Bravo and Charlie Batteries onto a mail helicopter. Service and Alpha Batteries picked up their mail directly from the clerk at Tan Son Nhut. He monitored address changes of new arrivals, personnel who departed from the Battalion and those who transferred within the Battalion. A sub-APO in Phuoc Vinh distributed the mail to the Battalion's elements there.<sup>30</sup>

Promotions were readily available to the men who deserved them with one major exception. The Battalion had left the United States with an excess of five Staff Sergeants (E6) because the forward observer augmentation to the TO&E was staffed with five men who were one rank above what was authorized. This created a bottleneck and a deterrent to morale. This augmentation should have been filled with E-4's.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps the most unusual aspect of the American Army's presence in Vietnam was its emphasis upon establishing and maintaining good will with the Vietnamese people. America's goal was to assist the Vietnamese people in their struggle against the communist aggression from the north and to aid in the creation of a strong regime in the south, one that could cope with the massive economic and social problems of the country. Thus considerable energy was devoted to civic action and other "nation building" projects. All units in Vietnam contributed in some way.

Civil affairs occupied a large place in the Battalion's affairs. Cordial relations were established with the MACV Advisory team and the local District Chief. On November 28, 1965 it was decided to assist the Phuoc Vinh school (located adjacent to the Headquarters Battery area) in several projects. As the school was located in a low lying area, soil was trucked in by Headquarters Battery to eliminate stagnant pools. A flagpole, a fence and a volleyball court were constructed, mainly by volunteer labor.<sup>32</sup> The well was repaired, as were the pump and cistern. The Battalion S-5 (Civil Affairs) Officer arranged for the hiring of a janitor for the school. He was paid on a daily basis from indigenous labor funds allocated to the area commander.<sup>33</sup>

Phuoc Vinh, like most Vietnamese towns, was woefully short of medical treatment facilities for its citizens. To alleviate this the Battalion Surgeon held sick call for the townspeople once a week at a small civilian dispensary. Between 50-75 patients were seen on each visit. The Surgeon

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<sup>30</sup>Unit Historical Report, Jan 66, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup>Operational Report, July 66, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup>Unit Historical Report, Jan 66, pp. 14-15.

<sup>33</sup>Operational Report, May 66, p. 4.

found that many health problems were caused by the simple lack of soap. This problem was alleviated by the men of the Battalion. Entirely on their own, they requested their families and friends at home to send bars of soap. The response to this campaign was excellent. Enough soap was received to give one cake to each patient at these weekly clinical sessions.<sup>34</sup>

The Battalion was well established by the end of 1965. Its positions were well fortified and it had adopted methods of operation that were well suited to the situation at hand. Moreover, in two months of operation the Battalion had made a large contribution to the war effort in the Phuoc Vinh area. The presence of heavy artillery in the Phuoc Vinh base camp made a direct attack on that camp by the enemy more difficult. VC operations within range of the big guns became risky endeavors for them. Harrassment and interdiction fire kept him at considerable distances from the base camp. Reconnaissance patrols became more effective, for destructive artillery fire could easily be brought upon the enemy when contact was made.

This reflected the situation throughout Vietnam by the end of the Vietnam Defense Campaign (December 24, 1965). By this date the American presence was of such size that much of the initiative of battle was wrested from the VC. The enemy was simply not equipped to pose a real challenge to the overall strength of the friendly forces. He was forced to concentrate on what he could do best - effective harrassment of friendly forces and villages. His only real hope now laid in his ability to wear down the American's will to fight. Assuming that the voice of the protest marchers was the voice of the people as a whole, the enemy may well have concluded that the men in Vietnam would tire easily of the war and would crack and commit errors under the pressure of combat. He was wrong. The American soldier was able to see instances of Communist aggression not noted by the critics at home. It was painfully obvious to him that if the Americans were not in Vietnam, the Communists would be, and that the South Vietnamese stood a far greater chance of determining their own destiny under an American hegemony than under Communist influence. He justified his own presence in Vietnam by faith in freedom and the explicit promise of the American government that self-determination for South Vietnam would be accomplished as soon as the Communist threat was erased. This faith went deep in a surprising number of American soldiers, and gave them a resolve and determination far beyond what the Viet Cong expected him to have.

The year 1966 dawned with a faint burst of hope on the Vietnamese horizon. A large, strong, well equipped, dedicated Army now stood on Vietnamese soil, ready and more than willing to fight the VC. The next phase of the war, the Vietnamese Counteroffensive Campaign, saw exactly that.

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid, p. 5.